The Medicine Bow Peak Challenge

By TJ Burr

Medicine Bow Peak Ridge from Overlook (Trail goes across ridge and down steep ridge on right)

In a remote, yet easily accessible part of southern Wyoming there is a Rocky Mountain trail run that will challenge every muscle in your body. This is a stimulating and breathtaking run for those who enjoy rugged terrain with a mix of scenic splendor. The hard part is trying to enjoy the scenery without injuring yourself. For this trail, like many in the higher elevations of the Rockies, you need to know how to navigate rocky terrain and constantly guard against twisting your ankle. The trail is the Medicine Bow Peak trail in the *Snowy Range Mountains* about one hour west of Laramie, Wyoming, depending on how many stops you make along the way. While many people know about this beautiful get-away, it is still well off the beaten path of the more popular areas south of the border in Colorado.

Medicine Bow Peak rises to 12,013 feet from the high plains of southeastern Wyoming. It is the highest mountain in the *Snowy Range Mountains* of *Medicine Bow National Forest*. As the name of the mountain range implies, they have snow on them year-round. Upper portions of the mountain are rocky, barren and wind-swept. There are several alpine lakes scattered around the base of the massive mountain, including Lake Marie, Mirror Lake, Bellamy Lake, Lookout Lake and others. It is the unchallenged mountain king in this part of the state being clearly visible from Laramie, over 50 miles to the east. In comparison, the highest mountain in Wyoming is Gannett Peak at 13,804 feet. There are a number of other peaks topping 12,000 feet scattered around the state, but nothing that tops Medicine Bow Peak in the southeastern territory. Whether you hike or

run the trail, you'll actually cross over the highest point on the summit, which is guaranteed to have your heart pounding and your adrenalin flowing.

My first experience with *Medicine Bow Peak* was a hike to the top, which was done before I caught the trail running bug. I was visiting the area on leave from the Air Force on June 21, the first day of summer. It was a challenging hike, but not overly difficult when compared to my climbs of Fourteeners in Colorado. Earlier in my life, I worked a summer job as a construction surveyor when the scenic highway was re-constructed across the Snowy Range. Every day while working there, I admired the mountain and the surrounding unspoiled beauty. I worked hard, long hours, but enjoyed being immersed in the rugged mountain terrain that I loved. After leaving the Air Force, I returned to live in Laramie earning a living as a civil engineer. That was when I really caught the trail running bug. Just twenty minutes east of Laramie, there are several trails in the Pole Mountain area of the *Medicine Bow National Forest*. A few miles farther east there is the rock-climbing playground of the Vedauwoo Recreation Area, which also offers some great trail running. The Pole Mountain trails were close enough that I could sneak away for a three-mile trail run during a slightly stretched lunch hour. It didn't take long for me to start thinking about more challenging runs at higher elevations, which led me west to the Snowy Range Mountains. During the longer days of summer, it was possible for me to make the drive to Medicine Bow Peak, run the 7-mile trail loop, and still have time to relax by the lake before dark. I also found myself frolicking in the Medicine Bow Peak area on many of my weekends. If you are a high country buff that lives in the area, it is hard to resist the lure of the Snowy Range.

On a clear day from the summit of *Medicine Bow Peak* you can see over 100 miles. The Rocky Mountains of Colorado are visible to the south, including Longs Peak – another favorite of mine. To the east you can see out across the Snowy Range Mountains to the high plains of Laramie out past Cheyenne and into Nebraska. The beautiful thing about Wyoming is the abundance of days with clear blue skies and intense sunshine. That doesn't mean that it is hot. There is always a hint of coolness in the Snowy Range as the air wisps across the ever-present snowfields dotting the area. Even on the hottest days in July and August, you may need a jacket to ward off the chill in the air. From a mountaineer's perspective, the mountain itself is not a majestic peak with a well-defined pyramid summit. It is a modest mountain with a rounded summit from most vantage points around the area. It stretches two miles from the south to the high point on the north end. The east side is steep with some sheer rock cliffs and technical climbing routes. The west side drops gently down into forested areas that are home to moose, elk, deer, coyotes, black bears, bobcats, mountain lions, marmot and other ubiquitous wildlife.

The Medicine Bow Peak trail starts at a paved parking area at the south end of Lake Marie (10,480 feet), which is also the south end of the mountain. Lake Marie is a pristine alpine lake with some of the clearest water imaginable. Restrooms are available. For a warm-up, you can take a brisk walk along the shore of Lake Marie. From the lakeshore, the mountain is in full view. You can mentally imagine yourself running across the high ridge that will take you above timberline into marmot habitat. You'll want to wear some rugged trail running shoes that can take the abuse of rocky terrain and keep your feet dry when crossing occasional patches of snow and streams. I like wearing moisture wicking socks, a performance long-sleeve shirt, and running tights on this run. A light layer of clothing that will keep you warm while evaporating your sweat is what you want to wear in this environment. I prefer the running tights at high elevations just because I like to keep my legs warm. A light windbreaker or rain jacket is another accessory you may want to tie around your waist, depending on the weather conditions. In the Snowy Range, a light summer breeze will feel cool to cold. If you don't pack water with you, make sure you have some in your vehicle for your return. On most of my runs, I didn't carry water with me for the sake of saving the extra carry weight. You'll lose a lot of moisture jogging seven miles above 10,000 feet. Sunscreen is another must to protect any of your exposed skin.

From the trailhead, if you choose to run the loop in a clockwise direction, you'll start ascending immediately. There are no level trail sections to gradually warm your muscles – the fun starts right away. The 7-mile loop will take you up the south end of the mountain, then lengthwise along the mountain to the northern summit, then down a steep zigzagging trail to the valley of many lakes, then through intermittent forested areas crossing a few streams, past Lookout Lake, along the east side of Lake Marie, and back to the parking area. During the first few minutes of your run you'll rapidly gain over 400 feet up a zigzagging section of trail that will take you from the pine trees near the lake to the rugged tundra above the tree line. When I first ran this trail, I was well conditioned for the terrain and elevation from my Fourteener climbing in Colorado. Even though there are some steep sections, I could run the entire loop without resorting to any walking. This run is great endurance test and good training for other high altitude runs. For the hardcore runners that are into the ultra extreme runs like the Leadville 100, this run offers a nice change of scenery for your training regimen. The added beauty is that you can start early and run laps until you collapse. This area also offers many other inviting trails (and forest service roads) for running, hiking and cross-country skiing.

During the first mile of the run, you'll climb 1,000 vertical feet up to a rocky tundra landscape. The trail is well marked with cairns constructed by the US Forest Service. Without the cairns it would be hard to find the trail in places. The air is so pure you can imagine it cleansing your lungs. For the next two plus miles you'll be running in the thin air above 11,400 feet as you gradually ascend toward the summit of Medicine Bow Peak (12,013 feet). You'll bypass several sub-peaks along the east ridge of the mountain. There is a chance to catch your breath and cruise for a few minutes before hitting the final 400-foot rise to the summit. This final push for the summit is a nice challenge to kick your body into its performance zone. On the very top you'll be doing more bouldering than running as you navigate the large rocky summit mound. On a clear day the view from the summit is a 360 degree panorama of high country with Colorado to the south, and wide open Wyoming in every other direction. If you carried an energy snack and some water, the summit is a good place to enjoy it. Even though your heart will have worked its way into your throat in a pounding fury, a drink will taste good at this point in the run.

After enjoying the summit vistas you'll immediately start your descent across more boulders, then onto a zigzagging section of trail following a ridge toward Sugarloaf Mountain. Shortcutting is not recommended and is very dangerous to yourself and others who might be on the trail below. You'll descend to a pass between the two mountains where there will be another intersecting trail that goes off to some of the alpine lakes to the north. You'll want to follow the southerly trail toward Lookout Lake.

From the pass back to the parking area at Lake Marie the trail improves and passes through the type of wilderness I enjoy the most. The surrounding wilderness contains a pleasant mix of pine trees, evergreen shrubs, lakes, sparkling streams and pure nirvana. Early in the summer, you'll pass and possibly have to cross some patches of snow. It could be wet in places, but nothing a good pair of trail running shoes and polypropylene socks can't protect you from. The aroma of pine in the air always lifts my spirit and boosts my energy a notch or two – I just love that smell. I guess the smell of pine trees remind me of my early years when I first realized how much I enjoyed mountain forests. This is where I usually get a "second wind". You'll also notice the air is a little richer with oxygen, which is a welcome boost. Find a comfortable rhythm, then enjoy the descending trail and surrounding beauty.

South Ridge of Medicine Bow Peak

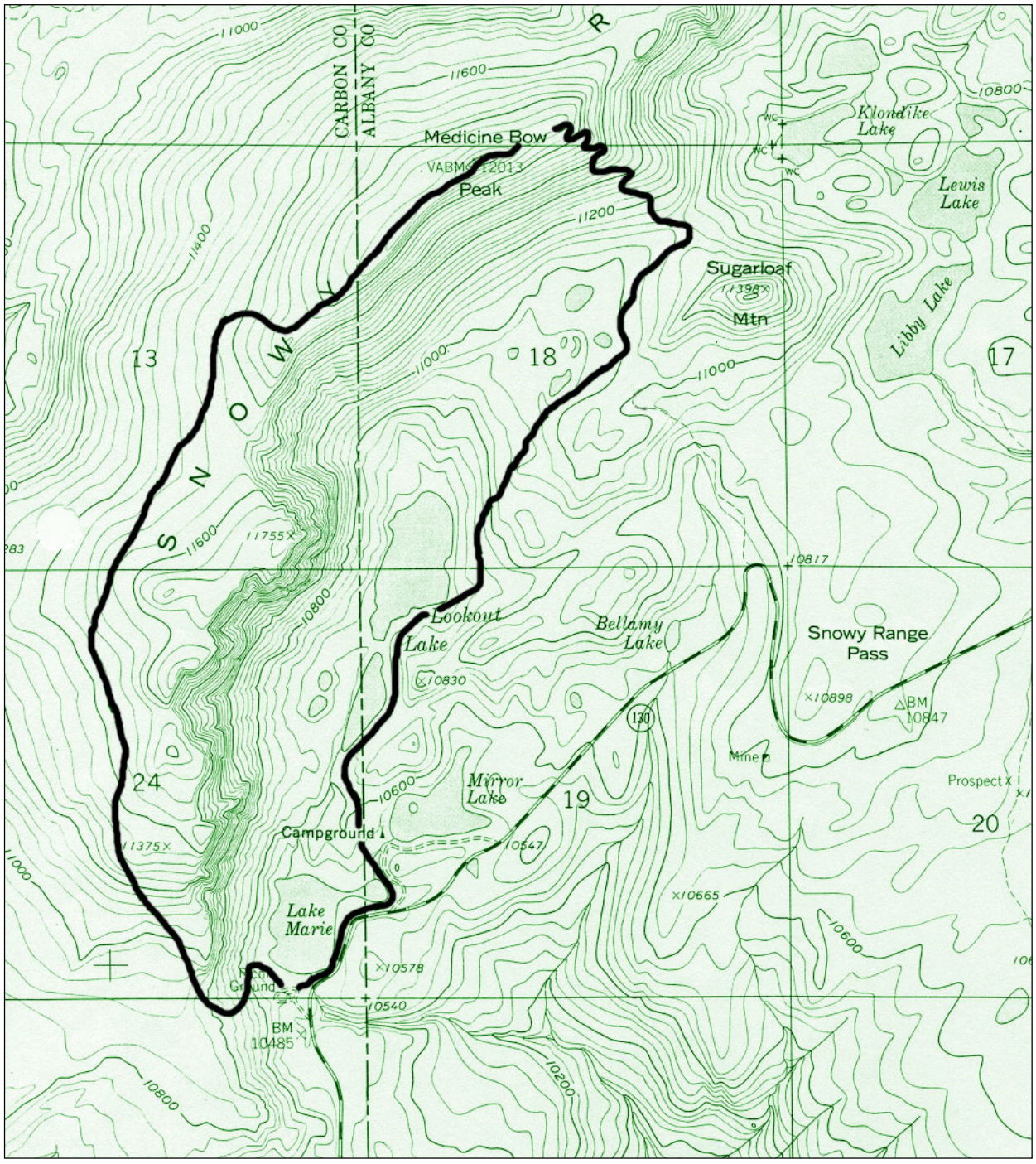
The trail is a little hard to follow after you reach the campground at Mirror Lake, but if you just keep working your way toward Highway 130 and the east side of Lake Marie, you'll pick up the trail again. Part of the trail around Lake Marie is asphalt and wheelchair accessible. Once you hit the paved trail, you can cruise right into the parking area for your cool down walk and post run stretching. Or, if there is enough daylight left and you are up to the challenge, just keep running for another lap. My best time on the loop was one hour and twenty-eight minutes, which is not a great time by any means, but something to aim for. The entire route is above 10,000 feet in elevation, which will have you gasping for air if you aren't accustomed to high altitude runs.

I'm sure none of you need lectured on the hazards of high country running, but it never hurts to remind yourself that you are running in untamed territory. If you pick the right day to venture onto the trail, you could easily be the only person on it. As Brian Metzler mentioned in the November 2003 issue of *Trail Runner*, "It's a jungle." In this case, it is the sparsely populated Wyoming wilderness. There are mountain lions in the Snowy Range Mountains, but the big "cats" in Wyoming aren't as edgy as the ones in Colorado that are being squeezed out of their natural habitats. While there are plenty of objective hazards to be aware of, lightning should be at the top of your list of concerns for your personal safety. Lightning is a serious high country killer that shouldn't be tempted. If there is a threat of thunderstorms and lightning, my advice is to wait for better weather before running this trail. There is plenty of scenery to enjoy in the area and other trails at lower elevations.

To get there, drive about an hour west of Laramie, Wyoming on Scenic Highway 130 – just follow the signs to the Snowy Range Mountains. It is only 25 miles north of the Wyoming-Colorado state border. From Laramie, drive across the high plains to the small community of Centennial located at the base of the Snowy Range. On a typical day between Laramie and Centennial, you will see more antelope than people. There is a motel and a restaurant or two in Centennial, if you plan to stay overnight. There are also several places to camp or pitch a tent in the *Medicine Bow National Forest*. Just west of Centennial, as you start to climb up into the mountains, there is a Forest Service visitor center where you can get current details and information about the surrounding area. As you continue up into the Snowy Range Mountains, you'll pass other trailheads and the Snowy Range Ski Area. Look for the parking lot and restrooms at the south end of Lake Marie right off of the highway. The road to the Medicine Bow Peak trail closes after the first substantial snowfalls occur, which can be as early as September. It re-opens again on Memorial Day, but if you go there that early you'll be running across snow most of the way. The best months for running this trail are July and August.

About the Author

TJ Burr is a Colorado native, author, mountaineer, and civil engineer. He spends most of his spare time adventuring in the outdoors. He spent most of his young life in Colorado and Wyoming enjoying outdoor adventure in the Rocky Mountains. His trail races include running the Pikes Peak Ascent two times, the Mt. Werner Classic, the Decker's Creek Half Marathon, the Valley Falls 10-mile, the Helvetia 10K, and the Ace Adventure 10K. He is the author of Rocky Mountain Adventure Collection, The Adventures of a Colorado Mountaineer. His book is available from Amazon at www.amazon.com/author/tjburr.



Topographic Map of the Medicine Bow Peak Loop Trail